



HELP

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HELPFILE

Weak WiFi reception on Zoostorm notebook

Q I recently purchased a Zoostorm 4-5701 laptop from PC Nextday and a Belkin wireless G+ router to connect it to my NTL cable broadband service. However, the signal strength is very poor, even when the router is only 15ft away in the same room. The connection works fine when just five-to-10ft away.

At first I thought that perhaps it was the router and that I should have bought a pre-N model with a wider range, but my work notebook (an HP nc4000) registers excellent signal strength at the other end of my house, which is approximately 50ft from the router through two walls. Do I have a faulty laptop or wireless card?

I've also noticed that this laptop interferes with MW radio, so I can't listen to my clock radio while using the internet. However, my work notebook doesn't. I don't know if this is connected in any way.

John Lyle, john.lyle@orange-ftgroup.com

A I have been noticing lately that there is a huge difference in quality between different makes of wireless card. Different laptops may also have different antenna arrangements. The antenna for internal cards usually runs around the edge of the screen. This affects performance, and turning the laptop around by 90° can halve the signal strength. It is weaker if the screen is edge-on to the direction of the wireless access point.

However, I recently did an experiment with two almost identical Dell computers. One was a Latitude D600, the other an Inspiron 600m, which is built using the same chassis. The only significant difference between them was that one had the Intel Centrino badge and was equipped with an Intel 2200BG wireless mini-PCI card, while the other had a Dell-branded wireless mini-PCI card made by Broadcom.

The system with the Broadcom card had much lower signal levels than the Centrino system, even when both were placed side by side on a table. I found the same thing with two Toshiba computers, one a Tecra with a Centrino badge, the other a Satellite with a Broadcom card.

I ran the tests in a university area where there were a vast number of competing wireless signals. The Centrino system identified 29 different access points within range, and I also noticed that the Centrino card was much better at locking on to a weak signal, while the other card was badly affected by interference from adjacent channels.

If two wireless cards supplied by a major manufacturer such as Dell can differ so much, the cards fitted in notebooks such as your Zoostorm may vary even more. PC Nextday doesn't state the make of wireless card it uses, so it is possible that the company may have switched makes of card since we last reviewed the system.

Your card may be faulty, or you may even find that someone forgot to connect the antenna properly, but I suspect it is more likely to be a problem inherent with

either the make of card or the design of the antenna. I would also suggest that you check to see if PC Nextday has an updated driver for the wireless card on its website.

CHECKING THE ANTENNA AND SHIELDING

I haven't taken this particular model apart yet, but on most notebook computers the mini-PCI card slot is under a lid on the bottom of the computer and you access it by removing one screw. This may be the same lid that covers the memory slots or it may be separate. It usually has an approval sticker on it.

Check that both the antenna wires (usually one black and one white one) are connected. The black one is usually the main antenna. If only one is connected the range will be reduced and I have seen laptops with neither connected but where the wireless card was still able to connect to an access point that was a few feet away.

Since mini-PCI cards come in one of three standard form factors, you can usually substitute another make of PCI card fairly easily. The cards fit in the slot in a similar way to SODIMM memory modules. You can buy an Intel 2200BG mini-PCI card on eBay for around £20 and download drivers from the Intel website.

The radio interference is most likely due to bad design. A notebook computer usually has thin sheets of aluminium covering vital components to minimise interference. Again, it is possible that your system was not assembled correctly. If someone left out a grounding wire or screw, the shielding would not be as effective. Interference is more likely to come from the power supply than the notebook itself. Does your problem still occur if you disconnect the power and run it off the batteries?

The radio frequency interference that some computer components generate is much more likely to disrupt AM radio (used by medium wave stations) than FM radio transmissions. WiFi uses FM, and WiFi cards operate at an extremely high frequency of 2.4GHz in the microwaves band, which is well above the frequency of the interference your radio is picking up. It would be surprising if the interference generated spread across such a wide range of frequencies.



▲ Install a better wireless card in the mini-PCI slot

Internet intrusions driving me mad

Q I have recently signed up to TalkTalk Broadband, which has been very successful. Initially I was inundated with adware, particularly from 888.com, System Doctor and other sites that offered to clean my computer. I have configured the F-Secure firewall that comes with TalkTalk to eliminate these intrusions but, as they seem to have got into the system before I set it up, they still try to get out. The firewall stops them and the result is a series of messages from Internet Explorer saying "The page cannot be displayed".

These intrusions happen every few minutes. The three offenders are www.ad-w-a-r-e.com, 888.com and Systemdoctor.com. How can I locate and delete the programs that are generating these requests? I have been unable to find them with Windows XP's normal search facilities.

Trevor Bury, trevor.bury@talktalk.net

A As you have realised, some nasty software has crept into your system and is generating these pop-ups. Such software finds its way on to your computer either through a Windows security flaw or by subterfuge, usually when you click to download some 'free' music or video. You are then told that you need extra software to play the download. Once installed, this sneaky software typically goes to great lengths to hide itself. Nowadays such software is generally called spyware, while the term adware is reserved for applications that you knowingly agree to install to support some free service.

To get rid of the spyware you need an anti-spyware program. As spyware changes so rapidly, you will often have to use two or three different programs to scan for and remove all the problem software. Fortunately some of the best anti-spyware programs are free, at least for the scanning and removal procedure. I recommend you download the following: Spybot Search & Destroy (www.safer-networking.org); Ad-Aware SE Personal (free version) (www.lavasoft.de); and AVG Anti-Spyware Free/Trial version, formerly known as ewido (<http://free.grissoft.com>).

You should probably also download the following additional tools, just in case the above scanners leave something behind. HijackThis is used to find programs that start up automatically (www.spywareinfo.com/downloads.php). SmitFraud Remover removes many kinds of spyware that promote fake anti-virus and anti-spyware programs (<http://siri.urz.free.fr/Fix/SmitfraudFix.zip>). Winsock XP Fix will help if removing the spyware leaves you unable to get online (www.majorgeeks.com/download4372.html).

Start by installing all three anti-spyware programs and run the updater for each to get the latest signature files. Don't bother to scan yet. Once you have installed and updated all three programs, reboot and restart your computer in Safe Mode. This is important, as some spyware includes a root kit that hides spyware components from view unless you are in Safe Mode.

To enter Safe Mode, press the F8 key repeatedly as the PC starts, after the first BIOS screen but before Windows appears. If you press F8 in time you should see a list of boot options. Choose Safe Mode.

Once your PC is in Safe Mode, run the anti-spyware programs and scan for bad programs. Don't be alarmed by lists of 'infected objects' that turn out to be cookies, as these are fairly harmless. Follow recommendations to remove whatever the scanners find.

As your symptoms appear to include adverts for fake anti-spyware programs, your PC may be infected with some variant of SmitFraud. New variations of this

appear every month, so I suggest that you unzip the SmitFraud Fix file listed above and run that. It works slightly differently in that, instead of scanning files for telltale signatures, it checks for Registry entries that each variant of the software is known to create and removes the files to which these entries point, too.

SmitFraud goes to great lengths to change its files and avoid detection by scanners, so this fix may find files that the three programs above missed. It also spots copies of certain Internet Explorer files that SmitFraud has modified and replaces them with clean versions. If your PC isn't infected it won't do any harm.

Finally, while you are still in Safe Mode, run HijackThis and create a log file. HijackThis lists every startup program and anything that deviates from Windows' standard default settings, so it will list lots of stuff that is perfectly OK. As it gives no guidance as to what is good and what is bad, you shouldn't use it to delete any entries until you have checked with an expert. For now, just save the log file for use later if needed.

Restart the computer and let it boot normally. Go online and check to see if the problem has disappeared. If it has, you've finished, but make sure you protect yourself against reinfection.

If you still get pop-ups the source is likely to be revealed in the HijackThis log file. You can analyse each line in the file and use Google to look for each filename to see if it is good or bad. Alternatively, post the log to one of the many websites that give free advice on what to remove. These include <http://forums.spywareinfo.com/index.php?showtopic=79038>, www.bleepingcomputer.com/tutorials/tutorial194.html, www.techspot.com/vb/topic19133.html and http://wiki.castlecoops.com/Malware_Removal:_Getting_Expert_Help_With_Your_HijackThis_Log.

Some spyware inserts itself as a 'layered service provider' into the Windows TCP/IP software called Winsock. Removing it disrupts the TCP/IP socket services and you won't be able to get online. Fortunately this is fairly rare now, as most anti-virus and anti-spyware software is smart enough to fix the damage. If it occurs, run the Winsock XP Fix program you downloaded earlier. You will need this program only if you find you can't get online, which is why I suggest you download it before you remove any spyware. Most users won't need it.

Once your system is clean you'll want to keep spyware out. Recently I have seen some websites that can trick even the most expert users. I know – I managed to infect my own computer while investigating one of these sites. I strongly recommend that you use some anti-spyware software that monitors for unexpected changes in your system and warns you when they occur. Most anti-virus software won't protect you against these risks.

The best programs available at the moment are CounterSpy 1.5 (www.sunbelt-software.com), which costs £11 including VAT; SpySweeper (www.webroot.com), which costs £25 including VAT; and AVG-AntiSpyware (www.grissoft.com), which costs £30 including VAT for two years. For more information see our lab test in Shopper, October 2006.

Free alternatives that offer real-time protection include Windows Defender (www.microsoft.com/security); Spybot S&D (www.safer-networking.org); and WinPatrol (www.winpatrol.com), which warns of unexpected changes.

Windows 98 and Me users should check compatibility before ordering, as some of the above programs support only Windows 2000 or XP.

Your experts

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Paul Mullen

With 27 years of PC experience as a power user, programmer and IT consultant, Paul Mullen answers all PC problems, tackling hardware, system and security issues.



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SOFTWARE HELP 174

Kay Ewbank

Database developer and productivity expert Kay Ewbank offers help with office applications.



Ben Pitt

Professional musician and keen photographer Ben Pitt gives advice on using creative software.



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BUYING HELP 178

Tom Royal

Labs Editor Tom Royal recommends the best products for your specific requirements.



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BUSINESS HELP 180

Simon Edwards

Web developer and security expert Simon Edwards provides IT solutions to your business goals.



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Please try to give full details of your problem. We need an email address or daytime and evening telephone numbers in case we need more information.

Although the policy of *Computer Shopper* is not to publish readers' email addresses, we include them in Help so that other readers with experience of similar problems can share their solution (please also cc any comments to the relevant Help department above). If you would prefer not to have your email address published, please say so. ➔

Wireless router keeps crashing

Q I am trying to maintain the IT equipment at our local Family History Research Centre. We share a 2Mbit/s internet account through a Netgear DG834GT wireless router between four computers connected by Ethernet and one by wireless. This works most of the time.

However, we have two additional computers that we bring in when we're busy, and these also connect wirelessly. There's also the occasional laptop. Most people use the computers to browse the internet and print their research results using the shared printer.

Almost every time we bring in the extra computers, we start to lose all internet connections. To reconnect we have to reboot the router and use fewer computers. I assume that we are stretching the router's wireless capability.

If this is the case, should we purchase a switch or hub and wire in the other computers, which are within the range of a six-metre cable, leaving wireless access just for the laptops? Or is a more powerful, commercial router likely to be more effective? Cost is always a factor, but if we need a new router, do you have a recommendation?

Alan Mead, Dorset Family History Society, webmaster@dorsetfhs.org.uk

A A wireless router should be able to handle far more client connections than you are using, so I would suspect that you probably have a faulty router. There may be a hardware fault in your particular unit or, more likely, a firmware bug. I don't think that adding a separate switch will help, either. The problem is more likely to be in

your router's DHCP server, wireless or stateful packet inspection (SPI) firewall components than in the built-in switch.

It's also possible that the overall level of traffic could be causing a problem at your ISP's end, but I suspect that the problem is in the router's firmware. A firmware upgrade will update both the router and the ADSL modem firmware. Check the label on the underside of your router to see if you have version V1, V2 or V3 hardware. V1 units don't show a version number because at the time Netgear didn't think there would be later versions. Then make sure you get the correct firmware for your unit. V1 and V2 units use similar firmware, but firmware for V3 can't be used on older units.

To confuse matters, the latest firmware for V2 units is numbered v3.01.25. There was a version 3.01.29, which many users claimed cured their problems, but this was withdrawn due to unspecified flaws. Although Netgear said in March 2006 that a revised version would be issued "as soon as possible", this still hadn't appeared by December 2006.

Searching on the internet reveals that, although many users of this unit are very happy, others have been plagued with unreliable connections. Upgrading the firmware has helped some of these, particularly those with ADSL-related problems.

Once you have the latest firmware, there are a few other things you can try. First, reduce the DHCP lease time to one hour. This won't cause anyone problems as their computer's lease will be renewed automatically every hour without their having to reconnect, but it means that the router won't have to keep track of leases granted to users who left the building days ago.

If all your wireless equipment uses 802.11g, turn off support for anything except 802.11g.

Using mixed wireless protocols may be causing your problems.

Next, ensure that wireless security (preferably WPA-PSK) is enabled. This will stop outsiders 'borrowing' your connection and running peer-to-peer file sharing over it. Peer-to-peer services such as BitTorrent commonly open many simultaneous connections, which could overload the router.

WEP security has a serious flaw that makes it easy to hack. It also requires that you enter long, hard-to-remember hex keys, while WPA-PSK lets you use a simple and memorable passphrase. The only problem with WPA is that, while Windows XP and all newer wireless cards support it, older cards for operating systems before Windows XP may not be able to handle it.

Next, do a 'site survey' using software such as NetStumbler (which is available from www.netstumbler.com). This will show you which channels other wireless access points in the vicinity are using. You may need to change the channel you are using to avoid interference from other access points on the same or adjacent channels. Check if other devices, such as microwave ovens or 2.4GHz cordless phones, are causing problems.

You should also turn off the router's event logging feature. Although this may be useful for troubleshooting purposes, it seems that the extra work of logging can cause this particular router to crash.

It could be bugs in the firewall feature. Try turning off Stateful Packet Inspection (SPI). Finally, check for overheating. Many users report that their routers seem to get very hot before crashing. Make sure the ventilation slots are not blocked and experiment with mounting the router in different positions, both vertical and horizontal, to get the best air flow.

Aborting Windows shutdown

Q I have set Windows to shut down when I press my PC's power button, and I like to use this as a fast method of shutting down. Obviously I don't mean holding down the power button to turn off the PC without shutting down Windows first.

The problem is that half the time, just as the PC starts shutting down, I remember that there was something I wanted to do. Is there any way of stopping the shutdown process before Explorer closes, or am I stuck with having to reboot afterwards?

Stewart Atkins, 01satkins@gmail.com

A Pressing the power button on a Windows XP computer with Power Management set up properly should have just the same effect as clicking on Start, then Turn Off Computer and then Turn Off. Of course, going through the Start menu is much slower, giving you time to think about whether or not you really want to shut down.

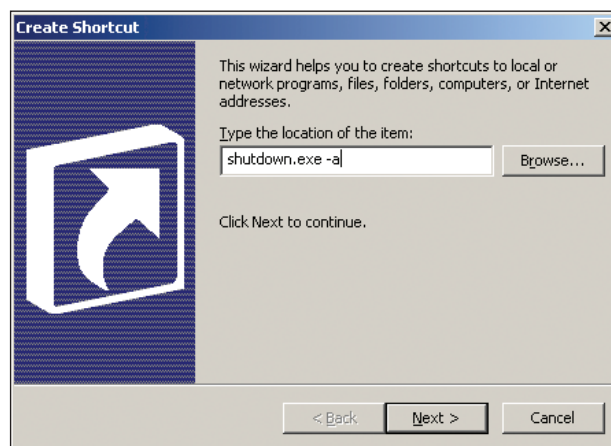
To abort the shutdown sequence once you have started it, type the command:

```
shutdown.exe -a
```

You would have to be a very fast typist to open a run command box and type this command before it's too late, so if you frequently need this command, it's a good idea to create a shortcut icon for it on the desktop or in the Quick Launch area of the taskbar.

To do this, right-click on an empty area of the desktop and select New and then Shortcut. In the window that appears, type in the command and then click Next, name it Abort Shutdown (or whatever name you prefer) and click Finish.

A new icon should appear on the desktop. Right-click on this icon, choose Properties and then click Change Icon. Click OK to ignore the warning that appears, and you will be able to



▲ Create a shortcut to abort a Windows shutdown

choose something more interesting than the default icon, such as the red X.

Once you have created this shortcut and defined its icon you can drag it to the Quick Launch area of the taskbar for faster access if you prefer.

Can I share files with a Mac?

Q Is it possible to share files between an Apple Mac –the exact model to be decided – and a laptop running Windows XP Home with SP2? Both will have broadband internet access through a wireless router and an ADSL modem.

Am I likely to encounter any compatibility problems?

Dave Ayres, daveayres@madasafish.com

A There are several approaches, depending on whether the connection is going to be used just occasionally or on a regular basis.

WEB-BASED SHARING

You can use a web-based email service for transferring files, emailing the files to yourself. I use the Google Mail service, although this has an annoying habit of refusing executable program files. That won't be a problem when sending files to a Mac.

PEER-TO-PEER SHARING

Use FolderShare (www.foldershare.com), an online Microsoft service that sets up a peer-to-peer network between your two computers and then synchronises the contents of specified folders. You need to load the software on both systems. Luckily FolderShare supports Windows 2000/XP and Mac OS X.

Specify the folders you wish to synchronise on the source and destination systems and the software makes sure that any changed files are copied to the other system. I use this to make sure files on my laptop are automatically backed up to my home and office computers. Currently this service is free and described as being in beta, so Microsoft may charge for it later.

FolderShare also allows you to use your username and password to log on to connected computers from anywhere on the web and then browse for and copy files.

WINDOWS NETWORKING

Older Macs used Apple's AppleShare software for sharing files over a network. This did not support the Windows file-sharing protocol, known as SMB, so sharing files between Windows and Macs was not easy.

The Tiger version of OS X (v10.4) allows a Mac to browse shared folders on a Windows network and to share Mac folders so that they appear in a Windows network. For details on setting this up, visit <http://joelshoemaker.com/computer/mac/wxpf.html>.

As for file compatibility, if you use similar versions of major applications, such as Microsoft Office's, you shouldn't have many issues. There may be occasional formatting oddities, though.

Many other Mac-based programs, such as Adobe Photoshop, have PC versions that can

read Mac files. Sometimes, though, the Mac versions of popular software programs can't read files created by the Windows versions. For example, QuickBooks for Mac uses a different file format to that used by QuickBooks for Windows. While you can convert files from one system to the other, you can't access the same QuickBooks company file over a network from both Mac and Windows as you could with two Windows PCs.

The other issue for file compatibility is that Mac software stores information about a file (including the application the system should use to open it) in a separate data stream called a resource fork. When you transfer files to a PC this information is lost, or may appear as an unreadable attachment in an email. Although the NTFS file system, often used by Windows, is able to store alternative data streams such as the resource fork, I don't know of any Windows software that enables this feature.

While many Mac applications have learned to store a copy of this information in the data fork, problems may still occur when moving data from one system to another. In particular, Windows mainly uses file extensions to determine which software should be used to open a file. For example, .xls indicates an Excel spreadsheet. A Mac stores this information in the resource fork. If you plan on sharing files, make sure that you save them with names that include a Windows file extension.

Can I reuse an old Xbox hard drive?

Q Recently my son's Xbox died. I hate to throw something away if it can be recycled, so I removed the hard drive before throwing the console in the bin. I thought it would make a good second drive in my PC for documents, keeping them separate from my main drive in case I needed to reinstall Windows after a crash.

I installed the drive but couldn't get it to work, so I tried it in a USB caddy but still had no luck. After searching the internet I discovered that Xbox hard disks are 'locked' to the Xbox in which they are installed.

Is there any way of formatting these drives so that they can be used in a PC? If not, this seems to be just another case of waste, which we should be trying to reduce.

Stuart McIntosh, stuart@mcintosh.co.uk

A The problem is that Microsoft didn't want hackers looking through the contents of the Xbox hard drive and figuring out how it worked. It uses a feature of the ATA specification that allows the computer BIOS to set a password on the hard drive. The password consists of 40 hex digits that are unique to each Xbox system and is based on the Xbox serial number and drive serial number.

Without the correct password the drive appears to be dead. This didn't stop the hackers, who have now released tools that you can run on an Xbox to determine what the password is, but it does make life inconvenient for users such as you.

Unfortunately, you need to run the tool that determines the password while the Xbox is running, so in other words it's too late. It's not all

bad news, though, as data recovery software is available that can remove the hard drive password. For example, the website at www.hdd-tools.com/products/rrs allows you to buy a license to unlock just one hard drive for €39 (around £26). However, if your Xbox hard drive is just 8GB, financially this is not worthwhile.

In theory the ATA password specification provides a method called Security Erase to remove the password by erasing the drive's entire contents. To use this you need the Master password, which is set at the factory, although Microsoft may have modified it. I don't know if the drives used in Xbox consoles have the default master password set or not. Besides, as most people are interested in recovering data from password-locked drives, there doesn't seem to be any easy-to-use tool to implement this feature.

Are SD cards suitable for backups?

Q My Toshiba notebook has a built-in slot for Secure Digital (SD) cards. Although I back up my files to CD every week, I have a small amount of data that needs to be saved more often.

Copying essential data files to the SD card is easy, if a little slow. Are SD cards a reasonably safe media for backing up data files?

Tony Fisher, tony@2000fisher.freeserve.co.uk

A It is too soon to make claims about the long-term reliability of SD cards, but in theory they should be extremely reliable. Judging by their physical construction I'd expect them to be more reliable than USB flash drives. I have seen a number of USB drives fail suddenly for no apparent reason.

Beware of high-capacity SD-HC cards of more than 2GB, as these seem to have some compatibility issues. SD cards, like other flash

devices, are also becoming fairly affordable. A 1GB SanDisk SD Card sells for £20.

Toshiba designed SD Cards with SanDisk and Panasonic, so originally it was mainly Toshiba computers that had built-in SD slots. Now SD cards have become so dominant in digital cameras that most notebooks have a built-in card reader. For other notebooks you can either get a PC Card slot adaptor or use a USB multi-format flash card reader.

Lost contacts and messages in Outlook Express

Q After struggling to achieve a broadband connection with TalkTalk for over two months, everything was finally sorted and things seem to be running OK at present, with one exception.

Just as we started getting broadband successfully, Outlook Express appeared as if it had been upgraded, although it doesn't look radically different apart from the opening page. However, we have lost all our saved files in this program, including all our email addresses.

TalkTalk claims this was just a coincidence. We can't access any new email accounts offered by the ISP, which was not able or willing to offer any support in this respect. Can you suggest any means of accessing the lost files, which I assume are still stored somewhere on our PC's hard disk?

Jeff Perkins, paulineandjeff@zoom.co.uk

A If the change in appearance is more than just the addition of TalkTalk's name, it is likely that you are using an older version of Windows and have upgraded from Outlook Express 4 or 5 to Outlook Express 6. During this process the storage locations of your mail and address book may have changed, so it will be necessary to import the old data.

Your first task is to locate the old data. Click on the Start menu and, if you use Windows Me, 2000 or XP, choose the Search option. Windows 95 or 98 users should click Start and then Find, selecting Search for files.

Enter 'Inbox' into the filename box and then click Advanced and choose the option to include hidden files and folders in the search.

Several files should turn up, because Windows creates empty files for user accounts that are never used. Check the size and date of each file. You are looking for the largest file, called either Inbox.dbx or Inbox.mbx, which should have a date that corresponds to the time you last used the old version of the program. Once you have found it, note the full folder path to this file.

This path often contains a very long string of hexadecimal digits. The easiest way to copy the path is to right-click on the file. You should see an option called Open Containing Folder; when you select that, a new window will open. Provided you have the View, Toolbars, Address Bar option turned on, you can then copy the full folder path from the address bar.

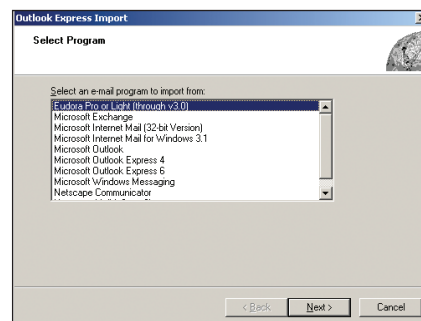
Next you need to import this data into your current copy of Outlook Express. Start Outlook Express and choose Import, Messages from the File menu. This will present you with a list of programs from which you can import data. You will see that it lists both Outlook Express 4 and Outlook Express 6. If the file you found was called Inbox.mbx, choose Outlook Express 4; if it was called Inbox.dbx, choose Outlook Express 6. Outlook Express 5 uses the same format as Outlook Express 6.

Select the option to import mail from an OE store directory. This will give you the chance to input the folder path you found, either by copying and pasting the entire path or by clicking browse and navigating to the folder.

A typical path will be: Documents & Settings/ /username/Local Settings/Application Data/Identities/*some long string*/Microsoft/Outlook Express. This path varies with the version of Windows and Outlook Express you are using. Once you get to the correct folder, click OK and choose to import all folders.

Now you can search for and import your address book. All versions of Outlook Express store addresses in files with the Windows Address Book (.wab) file extension, although its format varies according to the version of Outlook Express you were using.

To find the address book, click on Start, Search and type *.wab when asked for the filename. Make sure that you are searching in hidden folders. The search may highlight several files, so choose one that appears to be of about the right size and has the right date. In Outlook Express click on File, Import, Address Book and choose the path.



▲ Importing old Outlook Express files allows you to retrieve old messages

TalkTalk broadband problem

Q We've recently taken up TalkTalk's free broadband offer for use on our two wirelessly linked computers. The free broadband worked flawlessly for the first month, then it suddenly refused us access to certain websites, particularly eBay and Hotmail.

We have gone back to using dial-up access and the machines log in with no problem. Changing back to broadband re-creates the problem.

Andrew Howard, ahowardart@yahoo.co.uk

A Free services are usually popular, and this is the case with the broadband offer you have signed up to. TalkTalk admits that its customer service is totally overwhelmed. The likely explanation of your problem is that its network routers are overwhelmed, too.

Some readers are happy, while others have had nothing but problems. Your experience is not unique. TalkTalk's problems featured on the BBC's *Watchdog* in October 2006.

My scanner won't power on

Q Two years ago I bought a Mustek ScanExpress 1200 UB Plus scanner. It has given flawless service until the other day, when it refused to power on. At startup Windows Me displays a message saying 'new hardware detected' when there is no such thing. Then another message appears saying that an 'unknown USB device' is installed. This is my scanner, which is already happily installed.

This latter message leads me to suspect that the scanner is not taking power from the USB port, which Device Manager says is working properly. Is this a component failure or does the scanner have a duty cycle and is merely refusing to power on? I've seen mention of duty cycles with printers in *Shopper* and experienced this myself, but never with a scanner.

Gerry Walker, me.meggie@lycos.co.uk

A The 'new hardware detected' messages reveal that the scanner is getting power and is announcing its presence to the computer, and that the computer's USB port is receiving that message and passing it on to Windows. For some reason Windows is not recognising that the scanner has already been installed, but this is much

more likely to be a problem with Windows – specifically some corruption in the Registry rather than a hardware fault with the scanner.

If the hardware had failed, Windows typically wouldn't recognise the scanner. The only kind of hardware failure that would cause a 'new hardware detected' message is if the scanner's firmware had become corrupt, causing it to send an incorrect PCI device identification string. I have seen this happen occasionally, but it is very rare.

If you want to test the scanner, try attaching it to a different computer. This should detect it as new hardware, and you will need to load the driver provided with the scanner. I'm pretty sure you will find that the scanner is working properly.

The next step is to try using System Restore to see if this restores the Registry to a point where the scanner is recognised. If you still have a problem, uninstall the scanner drivers while the scanner is disconnected. Restart the PC in Safe Mode and go into Device Manager to make sure any hidden driver entries have been removed. Reboot the PC and connect the scanner. When the new hardware detection message appears, insert the CD that came with the scanner. Sometimes a scanner's instructions say that the software must be installed before you connect the scanner. If so, follow those instructions.

OEM versus retail versions of Vista

Q I am building two Vista-capable computers for home use, one for my wife and one for me. My wife will use hers mainly for regular, software-based purposes such as photo-editing, while I will use mine for changing and playing with hardware, CPUs, motherboards, graphics cards, memory, hard disks and so on.

If I buy a retail boxed version of Windows Vista Home Premium, can I load it on to both computers and keep reinstalling it on the hardware machine as necessary, or would it be better to purchase two OEM copies, bearing in mind that I expect to reinstall Vista on my machine frequently? Buying two copies of the retail boxed version would cost in the region of £440, according to Amazon.co.uk.

Robert Chorley, margbob@tiscali.co.uk

A You need two Windows licences, so you can't use the same copy of Windows Vista on two computers. You can buy the cheaper OEM version provided

you buy it along with a qualifying piece of hardware. The only disadvantage to the OEM version is that it is licensed for use only on the computer for which you bought it.

If you buy a retail version, when you replace your computer with a new one you can transfer the licence to the new computer, provided you remove it from the old computer. You can't do that with an OEM version. Microsoft says that if you replace the motherboard you in effect have a new computer and can therefore no longer use the OEM licence.

When Windows XP or Vista (either the OEM or the retail version) detects a new motherboard it will almost certainly demand that you reactivate Windows. After automatic activation fails you will need to talk to a Microsoft representative. For retail versions you simply have to explain that you're not trying to use it on two computers at once.

The same conversation may prove more difficult if you have an OEM licence because of Microsoft's stipulation that you can use the OEM version only on the computer with which

it was supplied. Microsoft will generally provide you with an activation code if you explain that your motherboard failed and you had to replace it, but this excuse won't work more than once or twice.

Another alternative if you are replacing an old computer that had a full retail copy of Windows XP installed would be to buy the cheaper upgrade version. As Vista is not yet fully available I can't give you any price details, but for Windows XP the upgrade versions cost about the same as an OEM version, which is much less than the full retail price. You can also buy a copy of Windows XP now with a free upgrade coupon for the corresponding version of Vista.

I feel that for a system that will go through frequent changes of motherboard, you need a retail version. This can be either a full or upgrade version, depending on whether or not you have a retail version of Windows XP.

The OEM version will be fine for the system that will use the same motherboard for a long time, as long as you buy it with some hardware to save money.

Will a LocationFree device work from Oz?

Q I would like to add a Sony LocationFree device to the back of my brother's Sky box and pick up the signal in Australia. Is this legal and can it be done?

Do I have to buy the PC to link with the Sony device in England so that it recognises its identification signal, or can I link up in Australia using a PC purchased there?

Colin Mahon, by email

A Sony's LocationFree box basically takes the output from up to three video devices, compresses them using an extremely effective compression algorithm and then makes them available over a TCP/IP connection. Anyone on your home network (or, with a little extra setup, anywhere on the internet) can then connect to that video stream, just as you connect to any of the many streaming video websites available today. Sony says it has users in Japan who watch video broadcasts from the US, and users in the US watching Japanese programmes.

The initial setup must be done locally, as you have to configure the NetAV software used to stream the video. You may also need to alter your router settings manually, unless your router supports Universal Plug 'n' Play (UPnP).

New LocationFree devices come with a free dynamic DNS service, so once it's set up, you can connect from almost any computer, anywhere in the world, simply by downloading the LocationFree player software and pointing it at the correct host device name.

The quality of the picture depends on the bandwidth available at each end and, to a lesser extent, on the internet conditions in between. The crucial requirement is that you must have at least 300Kbit/s bandwidth at

both ends. That shouldn't be a problem at the receiving end, where all but the slowest DSL connection should be adequate, but the A in ADSL stands for asymmetric and means that your upload bandwidth is much less than the download bandwidth. Few ADSL services in the UK offer more than 256Kbit/s upload speeds, which is usually the maximum available. For all sorts of reasons, including contention ratios, actual throughput could be much less.

You can check your uplink speed at www.changeip.com/locationfree/support. It is best to run this test several times at different times of the day.

Bear in mind that if LocationFree uses almost all the upstream bandwidth, your brother will experience a very slow internet connection speed. That upstream channel exists mainly to send requests to websites and acknowledge that data has been received when downloading. These take a surprisingly large amount of bandwidth, and he'll need even more if he wants to send email, particularly email messages with attachments.

The other significant flaw in the plan is that, because streaming video consumes a substantial amount of bandwidth, your brother's ISP may object. Internet providers have to pay according to the amount of traffic they send over the internet. That traffic will also cause congestion on their network and, as you can imagine, once the ISP figures out where the traffic is coming from, your brother won't be too popular.

Most ISPs monitor the bandwidth used by heavy users and take steps to ensure that excessive use by a few customers doesn't reduce the quality of service for others. The ISP will probably either throttle his bandwidth or block the ports used by the service.

Unless your brother works for a big corporation that has plenty of internet

bandwidth and doesn't care how it is used – and he can sneak the equipment into his office – this may not be such a good idea.

To do this properly you'd have to pay for your brother to get a business-quality high-speed internet connection, commonly called a T-1 or E-1 line, although this name is rather out of date now. Somehow I don't think you'll find the cost worthwhile. Wait until telephone and cable TV companies start laying fibre-optic cable direct to every home. They will do this only if they plan to offer cable TV service over it, and by then you won't need LocationFree. ☹



▲ Sony's LocationFree box lets you broadcast your TV subscription over the internet